

Good morning. My name is Gus Cardenas and I am the State President of AARP Texas. I represent over two million AARP members in Texas. I'd like to begin today with a quote. The novelist Henry James was once asked by his nephew for advice. "Only three things are important," he replied. "The first is: Be kind. The second is... Be kind. And the third is... Be kind."

Here at AARP, we're committed to kindness. That's what I plan to talk about today: Kindness. Compassion. Even love. I realize that's not what usually comes to mind when you think of AARP. You probably think of our magazine. Or our discounts. Or our work on economic and health issues like Social Security and Medicare. Or, if you're still under fifty, you're probably anticipating receiving your AARP invitation in the mail. You've heard friends talk about this -- and now, because of this exciting upcoming invitation, you can't wait to turn fifty, right? At AARP, we envision a world in which people lie about their age so they can join us even sooner.

But let's get back to kindness. Remember that bumper sticker: "Practice random acts of kindness"? It was a call to caring and compassion. It was an inducement to give for the sake of giving, without any boundaries or expectations. At AARP, we're all for random acts of kindness. But when you've got two million members in Texas... it helps to be organized. So here's what we do: we organize acts of kindness. We provide structured opportunities for people to be kind, to be helpful, to be of service. We do all of this through information, advocacy, and service. And we can't do any of it without the power and persistence of our members.

I'm here to talk about service. I'll explain why volunteering is at the heart of our work. And I'll share a perspective on volunteering that just might help you understand your own community service -- past, present, or future -- in a new light.

But first, let me thank you. Most of you are already serving your communities: in hospitals, neighborhood associations, schools, parks, and many other places. I want you to know that at AARP, we care. We appreciate your many acts of service, random or otherwise.

Not everyone makes time for service. Not everyone makes peace with it. Sometimes we struggle: How can I possibly do enough? What do I really have to offer? How can I fit in volunteer work when I have so many other commitments? You might have your own doubts. If so, that's okay. You don't have to do it all. Nor do you have to do it perfectly. Volunteers are ordinary people who find ways to give.

Our founder was one of those ordinary people. Ethel Percy Andrus was a teacher. After being horrified to discover a colleague living in poverty, Andrus became a visionary advocate for older Americans. In 1958 she founded the American Association of Retired Persons -- which today we simply call AARP. "To serve, not to be served," was AARP's first motto. And it all

started when one teacher saw one colleague in need, and responded with, "yes." So volunteering is part of AARP's heritage -- and today, it's more important than ever.

Even our advocacy work is fueled by volunteers. You might think of AARP as a bunch of lobbyists and lawyers who meet with Congressional leaders to support and defend older people's rights. We certainly do that. But we do it with the help of volunteers. During our recent Social Security campaign, for instance, more than 500,000 people called their Congressional representatives to support AARP's position. That's an unconventional way to think about volunteering, but the truth is, people do serve their communities, and their country, when they become politically involved.

Our board of directors is an all-volunteer team. So are many leaders at the regional and state levels. Our employees "walk the talk" during our annual Day of Service, when our offices close and we disperse throughout our communities, lending many helping hands. We build playgrounds for schools; prepare food for the homeless and homebound; visit seniors in nursing homes; and clear trash from parks. In other words, we do what we can to enhance the quality of life for everyone as we age.

In the future, volunteering will change. We know that Baby Boomers tend to volunteer when something is meaningful to them -- rather than from a sense of duty, as their parents did. When they were young adults, Boomers volunteered because of commitment to causes -- such as Civil Rights or the Women's Movement. Now, some may prefer such things as fundraising for a charity ball, or donating clothes and books.

Our research shows that Boomers tend to be more mobile and many will continue to work after they turn 65. However, like the generation before them, Boomers will have a need for social interaction, which we all know is a wonderful by-product of volunteerism. To ensure that our newest and youngest members are able to volunteer, we at AARP have engaged in new and innovative volunteer opportunities, such as episodic volunteering, which means creating more choices for individuals to select when, what, and for how long they volunteer. Over the coming years, we plan to be even more flexible and inventive to increase these opportunities.

Without volunteers, AARP could not achieve our vision: a world in which all of us age with dignity and purpose. I've provided examples of some AARP volunteers who demonstrate love in action. And I've described AARP's leadership role in creating opportunities for millions of people to "practice organized acts of kindness."

The word practice is important. When you practice anything, you improve. When you repeatedly open your heart, your heart grows bigger, broader, more endlessly capable of giving love. And that, of course is what I've really been talking about this whole time: love. If we at AARP are going to continue to enhance everyone's quality of life, we're going to have to make sure those lives include plenty of love. Volunteers are ordinary people who say yes.